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ABSTRACT

In this story, a young Aleutian man relates his impressions about the arrival of the first Russian explorers on the Aleutian Islands in the 18th century. The story is to be used as part of the social studies unit, The Aleuts of the Eighteenth Century, to show the Aleutian perspective on the event. The narrator tells of the arrival of a strange boat, consultation of the Aleuts' shaman for instructions about how to act toward the strangers, face-to-face contact and exchange of gifts, misinterpretation of muskets as gifts, and an ensuing struggle which results in an Aleut being wounded and the strangers' departure. Throughout the story references are made to Aleutian customs, such as the posting of a lookout for whales and enemies while others prepare food for winter storage. Many pictures illustrate the events. Aleutian-language words are used where appropriate in the story. A glossary provides definitions of those terms and English words which may be unfamiliar to intermediate and junior-high school students. (AV)

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STRANGERS

The Aleut Side

Book Ia

The Aleuts of the Eighteenth Century
Social Studies Unit

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STRANGERS

I.

The narrator of the following story has lived on this island in the western Aleutians all his life, and was brought up in a village close to where the action of this story took place. He is married to a woman from the same island, though her village lies around the point to the east. He has a son who will soon be old enough to leave his mother and go to her village where he will live with her brother. The narrator's brother-in-law will bring his nephew up in the ways of his family.

The narrator, like the other men on the islands, is a good hunter. He handles his bidarki well and has a sharp eye for spotting sea mammals on the horizon. But he is most respected for his skill in inventing new tools and toys. He has always liked to experiment with materials, shaping them into tools that are easier to use or faster to put together or better for bringing down game than the old ones. Over the years, the other people in the village have gotten into the habit of taking to him any strangely shaped rocks or sticks they find on the beach so that he can

make them into new and different tools. And whenever anyone finds an old tool in a sunken barabara pit, he takes it to the narrator to find out how it was once used.

The summer has provided well for this man's village. The chum salmon run just over was heavy and his family has dried many fish for the coming winter. Berries were sweet and plentiful, and they too have been picked and stored in seal oil for the winter. Soon the islanders will depend on these stored foods and on the roots, fish, and beach food they can gather during the winter.

Preparations for the coming winter are interrupted, however, by the arrival of some unexpected visitors. Here is the narrator's story:

ITANGIX̂ ANGALIX̂ -- THE FIRST DAY

II.

We had recently returned from fish camp and were busy re-covering the barabaras with rye grass in readiness for the coming winter. Suddenly the lookout, who was on top of the hill watching for whales and enemies, called down to us, "Whale on the horizon!"

III.

We men all ran up to the top of the hill for a look, followed closely by the children and women. If there a whale out in the ocean, we would begin the hunt right away. Our baidars were ready for just such a chance.

Once on top of the hill, we looked out onto the ocean. The clouds were high and we could see far beyond the entrance to the cove. There in the distance, just as the lookout had said, was a very big creature. It was the size of the right whale, but it swam on top of the water, not in it. And it had white wings raised like a bird ready to take flight.

IV.

As the creature swam closer to the island, its true nature became clear to us: It was not a whale, and it was not a giant bird; it was a huge boat with many men inside. The boat was so large that the men could walk back and forth without tipping it or bumping into each other.

We decided to remain hidden until we learned who these people were and why they were here. We have enemies in the other islands to the east, but we did not think that this large boat was theirs. Our enemies have baidars like ours, not huge winged boats like this! We sent the women and children home to gather their belongings in case they would need to hide in the hills until the strangers left.

As the huge boat came into the cove we had a chance to look at it more closely. It was made of wood, not skin like our boat. We thought it wasteful to use up so much wood on a boat, when skins are so plentiful. We wondered where these men came from, for there is no place on the islands where a person could find so much wood. Perhaps they were from the land far to the east, where it is said that wood grows like grass.

V.

As we watched, the men lowered a smaller boat into the water from the side of the big one, and a few of the men climbed into it. The smaller boat was bigger than our hunting bidarkis, but smaller than our whaling baidars. It too was made of wood. When we saw it bounce and roll in the water, we thought how easily the wooden boat would be broken up in the storms which let our skin boats bend and glide. We jokingly called it a "floating log."

VI.

The strangers paddled their floating log into shore and pulled it up above the tide line. As they stepped onto the beach, they looked carefully up and down the shoreline, then climbed over the beach ridge up onto the grass. They did not see us watching them from on top of the hill.

The men stayed on land for only a short time. They walked over to our salmon stream and tasted the water. We wondered if they were going to try to claim the stream for their own use. We watched carefully as they bent over the stream; surely they must know they did not have the right to fish in territory that was not theirs!

We watched as they stooped and picked up some things from the ground near the stream; among these things I recognized the grass bag I had lost the day before. Soon after, the men launched their boat and paddled back to the bigger boat, carrying our things with them.

Those of us who watched from the hilltop decided to wait a while, and see what the visitors did next. The large boat remained in the cove all afternoon, but no one came ashore again. We finally decided we might as well go back down to the village; but first we posted a lookout to watch the strangers through the night in case they were planning to attack us while they thought us asleep. One of the young men ran down to the village ahead of the rest of us to tell the women and children and old folks to stay at home, but be ready to flee to the hills in case of an attack. He then paddled around the point to the neighboring village to warn his sister and nephews about the strangers.

VII.

Meanwhile, the rest of us gathered for a council meeting in the chief's barabara. We talked for a long while, each man offering his opinion in turn. The chief finally summed it up: we all agreed that the people from the big boat had not acted like enemies; they were too bold, not sneaky enough. And enemies would not have allowed themselves to be watched so easily.

And we agreed that they had not acted like friends either. Friends would have paddled ashore all together to let us know they meant no harm, and would have come into our barabaras and eaten with us. We were at a loss. We had no explanation for the visitors' strange behavior; and so we consulted one of the shamans of our village to learn from his spirit helpers what the strangers intended to do and how we should act toward them.

The shaman agreed to help us. We were all seated in the chief's barabara when he began his ceremony. An assistant began a steady beat on his drum, calling for the spirit helper. The drumbeat became faster and the shaman began a circular dance in time to the beat. The drum speeded up more, the shaman whirled around the

floor, whirling faster and faster as the music became faster and louder. He went around and around narrowly missing the men sitting along the sides of the bar-abara. And then he dropped onto the floor, in a trance. The drumbeat stopped. All was quiet for a moment. Suddenly the shaman let out a great yell. He shouted out sounds, words in a language we could not understand. We listened and did not interrupt. This was the voice of his spirit helper, speaking through him. We knew the shaman would interpret the spirit's words for us later.

When the shaman came out of the trance, he looked at us closely and began to instruct us in a low voice. We should stay up all night and fast, he told us. In the morning we should dress, paint, and arm ourselves for war, show ourselves on the beach, and ask the strangers to explain themselves. If they had come as enemies, we would attack them on signal. If they meant to be friends and offered gifts to prove it, we would return the kindness with gifts of our own.

By morning, we men had purified ourselves for war according to the shaman's instruction. Yet even as we dressed and painted ourselves,

we were uncertain and jumpy. Little things got on our nerves. We argued with each other. I even snapped back at my uncle when he made a small suggestion about painting my face.

As I look back on it, our preparations seem strange and unnatural: on the outside, we were dressed for war; but on the inside, we were confused and in an improper frame of mind for war. Of course, if we had known then what we know now, we would certainly have acted much differently!

When all the men were ready, we told our wives and children and parents to hide in the hills until the strangers were gone. We climbed the hill behind the village and started down the other side toward the cove where the big boat was sitting in the water.

VIII.

AALGISIX̂ ANGALIX̂ -- THE SECOND DAY

In spite of our misgivings, the day began well. Counting our relatives who had come from the other villages on the island, we outnumbered the invaders.

The strangers saw us from their boat but for a long time did nothing. It occurred to me that they were more frightened then we. Finally, some of them climbed down the side of the big boat into the floating log. They paddled in toward us, and as they came nearer we called to them. They called back, and we realized we would have to speak through sign language, for they did not know our language. They acted friendly, though they were awkward and did not know the ways of hospitality. When the floating log got close to shore, their chief threw some smooth, shiny needles to us and my friends passed them to me to examine. These needles were shaped like ours but were of a different material. I passed the needles out to all the men, keeping one to take home to my wife.

We in turn threw some cormorant skins back to the strangers in the floating log. They smiled at us, waved, and paddled back toward the big boat. Our shaman's advice had been good. In great relief we sent word for our families to return home from the hills. We left a lookout on the hilltop, and the rest of us went back to the barabaras to talk and plan for the next day. Our spirits were high as the tension of the day slipped from us.

IX.

QANKUNISIX̂ ANGALIX̂ -- THE THIRD DAY

In the early morning we all awoke, less fearful of the strangers after the gifts of the previous day; but we were still a little cautious and very curious. Soon after we arrived on the beach, again protected by clothing and prayer, the strangers put their small floating log into the water and paddled toward us.

Again we exchanged gifts. The newcomers gave us a long spoonlike object with fire in the bowl, and we gave a beautiful carved dance staff to them. Then the invaders started to act very strangely. We could see that each man had another gift in his hands, for they all held long staffs something like the one we had given to them. Yet they refused to give us these gifts. We were insulted by their impoliteness. Surely if they had not meant us to have the staffs, they should not have brought them ashore and showed them off to us!

Our chief pointed to the staffs, gesturing that he needed an explanation for the rudeness, but the strangers backed off and pointed their sticks at us. My cousin leaned toward one of the strangers and touched his staff. The stranger drew back, my cousin held tightly to the staff, the two men began struggling and everyone began to shout. Then suddenly -- BOOM -- louder than a volcano, a great noise burst from the staff and threw us all to the ground. Noise was not all that came from the stick: It also shot fire which tore the skin from my cousin's hand.

We rushed him to the water to wash off the blood, and in the confusion, the strangers jumped into their floating log and paddled hurriedly back to their big boat. Those of us who were not too stunned by the explosion jumped into our bidarkis, paddled after them, and when we got within range of the big boat hurled our spears at them. We knew our spears were useless against the stiff wooden hull of the big boat, but what else could we do?

The big boat lifted its wings and was soon traveling along the water toward Attu. We hoped that our relatives on that island would beware of the strangers as we had not. We later learned that they too met the staffs of the invaders, and that they were not as lucky as we -- some of the Attuans were killed by the fire from the staffs.

X.

That was our first meeting with the invaders. We were not prepared for them then, but I have plans to take one of their staffs and examine it closely. I might be able to learn how to make it spit out fire. And who knows? Perhaps the staffs will be even more powerful in our hands, for we have been careful to follow the shaman's advice and attend to all our taboos and rules toward the spirits since the day we first saw the invaders. We will be ready if these men come to our island again.

GLOSSARY

baidar: a large open boat made of a wooden frame and covered with skins, used in group hunts for large sea mammals like whales; similar to an Eskimo umiak

barabara: the traditional, partly underground Aleut house, made by digging a large pit, propping up a driftwood or whale rib frame, and covering it all with sod

bidarki: a small kayaklike boat made of a wooden frame and covered all around with skins except for a hole on top in which a person sits

cautious: careful to avoid danger

curious: eager to learn or know

experiment: to test or try something new

invader: one who enters by force or comes in as an enemy

narrator: a person who tells a story

outnumber: to be more than or exceed in number

plentiful: enough or more than enough

purified: made clean; freed from guilt or sin

respected: honored; thought well of

right whale: a large baleen whale traditionally hunted by the Aleuts

shaman: a healer and teller of the future; one who could speak with the spirits that controlled the animals which the Aleuts depended on for food and clothing

taboos: sacred prohibitions or restrictions

territory: the land and waters belonging to or used by a certain group of people

unexpected: not looked for

writhed: made twisting or turning movements